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# Momentous Decision: Capital Center Project

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# Momentous decision: Capital Center Project

## Chester Smolski

It may very well be the most important decision facing Providence in this century; it would provide new commercial space approximately one and one-half times that found in the present downtown; it would remove black and ugly "dead" space (parking) from the foot of the state Capitol and replace it with acres of greenery and an enhanced riverfront; it would provide better access into the downtown and facilitate the east-west flow of traffic; it would drastically alter the focus of the downtown; and it would greatly increase the tax base of the capital city. The Capital Center Project, with its proposed relocation of the railroad tracks and construction of a new railway station, offers all of these opportunities for the city of Providence.

It was only through the concentrated efforts of the Providence Foundation over the past six months that this proposal has come to fruition. The Foundation report on objectives (done in association with the city and state) and the Skidmore, Owings and Merrill development plan and impressive scale model of the project are a tribute to the intensity of work done to get the proposal ready for the myriad steps and procedures required before any final approval can be given.

There is still a long path to follow before any visible signs of construction make the public aware that something is happening. For the immediate future it is necessary that the U. S. secretary of transportation give his approval to the proposal and that Congress appropriate an extra \$750 million to the Northeast Corridor rail improvement program, this money to provide some of the federal funding for the railroad relocation. The proposal would stop if either of these federal actions is not forthcoming.

At the local level it would be necessary to start an environmental impact study during this year so that the lengthy process which requires citizen reactions and suggestions would be concluded by 1981. Final design work would be finished by 1982 with the first signs of construction slated for that year and phase one completed by 1984, should this initial timetable be met. A very lengthy process which could easily stretch out beyond ten years for the total project, this massive development covering 61 acres, approximately one-sixth of the total downtown area, is both visionary in concept and bold in imagination.

A proposal to relocate the railroad tracks comes up about once in each generation; it has yet to happen. In addition to commitment and funding, there must also be a mechanism to carry it through. As proposed, implementing the proposal would fall into the hands of a building authority comprised of state and city appointees and representatives from the business community. Various community groups have also suggested that some selected members of the general public be chosen to sit on this important body which would oversee the project.

It is essential that this project be under the supervision of a building authority whose members represent the highest quality that the state, city, business community and general public can offer. Too often, at both the state and city levels, political favors rather than quality people have determined appointments. The consultant's report concludes by saying, "The rhetorical question is how does one guarantee the quality of the play. The rhetorical answer is that is entirely up to the quality of the actors."

The proposed railroad relocation has captured the enthusiasm and support of the mayor of the city, the governor of the state, the *Providence Journal* and a host of others. But before all of us jump aboard the bandwagon and start beating the drums, we would be well advised to consider some of the costs, not only in money but also potential impact on the downtown, that must go along with the benefits of this proposal. In other words, what do we give up in order to have this development?

Critics have claimed that placing a new railway station approximately 1,000 feet north of the present one would destroy the intermodal concept put forth in the *Interface:Providence* report, which would have train, bus and pedestrian traffic come together (interface) at the Union Station. Transfers between the bus terminal and the proposed train station would certainly be more difficult than the present convenient location of these transportation terminals.

A serious consequence of the proposed Capital Center Project would be the inability to effectively use the recently purchased state railway right of way from Bristol to East Providence (Conrail owns the railway tracks from there into the city by way of the East Side Tunnel) for light rail transit, a possibility that Statewide Planning is investigating. With the energy problem certain to be worse over time, this opportunity to provide mass transit directly into Union Station from the East Bay area would be severely curtailed if there were a new station built.

Some architects also criticize the proposal because of the aesthetic loss of a "grand entrance" into the city with entry by train through Union Station, which occupies a high point of land, as compared with the at-grade and partially covered proposed railway station.

Whether one considers this aesthetic criticism or not, there is also the major determinant of cost to be considered. Admittedly, there will be an increase in the tax returns to the city but at what cost? The consultants have projected a \$44 million figure for the project, based upon

mid-1977 construction costs, with less than \$2 million of that a cost to the city and a close to \$4 million cost required by the state. The consultants have also recognized the inflationary factor and have suggested an annual rate of 8.5 percent. Using that figure, the cost of the project would be \$51 million today and \$66 million by the time construction starts in 1982. It is true that most of this money will come from the federal government, but it is still money that taxpayers provide in one way or another.

The Providence Foundation and the different government groups involved will be sponsoring a series of meetings during the next several months at which citizens will have the project explained, and at which citizens will have the opportunity to make their voices heard. It is important that as many as possible attend and comment on this most important urban design project to be considered for our capital city.

Coincidentally, it has just been announced that a \$170 million privately developed, office-residential complex will be constructed in the downtown of Baltimore, a city which has been proclaimed the most successful in the nation in the use of its renewal programs. This 22-acre development will also relocate the existing railway station, currently servicing 1,000 commuters a day, to a nearby site. As the project developer stated, "It is the right time for a lot of Eastern cities. It's the right time for Baltimore." Perhaps the proposed Capital Center Project is the right time for Providence.

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*Chester E. Smolski is Director of Urban Studies, Rhode Island College.*